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Trump Nominee Represented Corporate Polluters Who Paid \$93M In Fines

By Alan Zibel

"I like to remember how much more effective the oil and natural gas industry is at providing a real solution to climate change than any international treaty such as Paris or Kyoto" — Kathleen Sgamma, President Trump's nominee to lead the Bureau of Land Management

A close oil and gas industry ally and Project 2025 author with a history of minimizing climate change may soon lead the federal agency that leases out public lands for drilling, speeding the way for the rampant exploitation of America's national public lands for private profit.

President Donald Trump [nominated](#) Kathleen Sgamma, the longtime president of the Western Energy Alliance — a Denver-based oil and gas trade group — to run the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, which manages 245 million acres of public lands, largely in western states.



If Sgamma is confirmed, oil and gas companies will have a [close friend and former colleague](#) in office to respond to industry wishes. Sgamma is likely to leave no favor ungranted for the wealthy fossil fuel executives who [spent a shocking \\$450 million](#) to fund Trump's campaign and elect friendly lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Sgamma was one of a small group of people who wrote the Project 2025 section on the Department of Interior,¹ claiming that the Biden administration declared a

¹ William Perry Pendley, the [far-right former Trump official](#) wrote the Interior Department chapter of Project 2025 but [gave credit to Sgamma and two other authors](#) for writing a section on energy.

“war on fossil fuels” — a statement that ignores the reality that U.S. [crude oil](#) and [natural gas](#) production both set new records during the Biden administration.

Enforcement Cases and Fines

To determine which corporations could derive the most benefit from their close ties to Sgamma, Public Citizen analyzed the backgrounds of all 31 members of the Western Energy Alliance’s board, which were disclosed on the group’s 2023 [annual nonprofit filing](#) with the Internal Revenue Service.

The analysis found that the trade group included representatives of oil and gas companies, including international oil giant Exxon Mobil to large U.S. producers such as Devon Energy and EOG Resources to smaller oil and gas companies. The remaining members were staff of the Western Energy Alliance or representatives of banks, accounting firms and lawyers catering to the oil and gas industry.

While Sgamma has insisted that pollution and compliance problems among oil and gas companies stem from [a few bad actors](#) and [fly-by-night operators](#), a review of enforcement data raises doubts about that assertion.

Public Citizen reviewed [enforcement cases](#) involving these oil and gas companies represented on the Western Energy Alliance’s board. Our analysis found that of the 22 oil and gas companies on the Western Energy Alliance’s board, 15 faced financial penalties of more than \$5,000 since 2020, totaling a combined \$93.4 million since 2020. More than 90% of those fines were from environmental penalties, according to the Violation Tracker database run by Good Jobs First. Those penalties include:

- An \$18.3 million Colorado state [fine](#) to a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum over the April 2017 explosion of a gas line in a suburban Colorado neighborhood that killed two people. Occidental acquired Anadarko Petroleum, the owner of the pipeline, in 2019.
- A \$16.3 million Pennsylvania [settlement](#) with Coterra Energy over [contaminated drinking water](#) in Pennsylvania. Coterra Energy was formed by the 2021 merger of Cimarex Energy and Cabot Oil and Gas, which [pleaded no contest to criminal charges](#) over contaminated drinking water in rural Pennsylvania. Coterra then [resumed drilling](#) in the area.

- A \$16 million federal and state [settlement](#) with Ovinitiv Inc over illegal emissions of volatile organic compounds at oil and gas production facilities in [Utah's Uinta basin](#).
- Two major ExxonMobil settlements, including an \$11 million air pollution settlement involving an ExxonMobil [oil refinery](#) in Illinois, and a \$9.5 million [settlement](#) over wetland contamination in New Jersey.
- A \$6.1 million [settlement](#) with Devon Energy over underpayment of royalties to drill on public lands in Wyoming and New Mexico.

Table 1: Enforcement Cases Faced by Fossil Fuel Companies Represented on Western Energy Alliance Board

Company	Western Energy Alliance Board Member	Notable Enforcement Actions	Cases Since 2020	Settlement Grand Total
Occidental Petroleum	Robert Mathes , managing counsel for Rockies region	Fined \$18.3 million in 2020 over a deadly explosion of a Colorado gas line owned by predecessor company Anadarko Petroleum.	48	\$29,033,130
Exxon Mobil	Gregory Pulliam , Public and Government Affairs Manager, Western Division	\$11 million air pollution settlement involving Illinois refinery ; \$9.5 million settlement over New Jersey pollution	18	\$22,226,474
Coterra Energy	Stephen Flaherty , Vice President, Government Affairs	\$16.3 million settlement over contaminated water involving Cabot Oil and Gas, purchased by Coterra.	2	\$17,635,275
Ovinitiv Inc.	Jessica Cavens , Vice President, Midstream & Marketing	\$16 million settlement with federal and Utah regulators over air pollution	2	\$16,006,500
Devon Energy	Mark McDaniel , Senior Counsel	\$6.1 million settlement over underpayment of royalties to drill on public lands in Wyoming and New Mexico.	4	\$6,275,150
Caerus Oil and Gas	Dave Keyte , Chairman and CEO	State environmental violations in Colorado.	4	\$463,610
DJR Operating	Dave Lehman , President and CEO	\$426,000 civil penalty over unauthorized emissions from storage tanks at 12 facilities in New Mexico..	1	\$426,000
EOG	Tracy Opp, Division Regulatory Manager	\$243,600 settlement related to unauthorized drilling in Oklahoma.	3	\$409,695
Liberty Energy/Liberty Resources	Chris Wright , (former CEO, Liberty Energy); /Mark Pearson (president	\$265,000 settlement of lawsuit involving hostile work environment allegations made by Black and Latino workers.	1	\$265,000

Company	Western Energy Alliance Board Member	Notable Enforcement Actions	Cases Since 2020	Settlement Grand Total
	and CEO, Liberty Resources)			
Enduring Resources	Alex Campbell , Vice President	\$185,000 civil penalty over emissions at five facilities in New Mexico.	1	\$185,000
Laramie Energy	Robert Boswell , Chairman and CEO	\$109,000 Colorado fine .	4	\$161,500
Terra Energy	Michael Land , CEO	\$78,500 fine over injury to a state oil and gas employee at a company well site.	3	\$139,750
Bayswater Exploration and Production	Steve Struna , President and CEO	\$79,200 fine in Colorado	2	\$91,661
Lario Oil & Gas	Mike O'Shaughnessy , Chairman and CEO	\$65,000 penalty over Clean Water Act violation	1	\$65,000
Halliburton	Robert Harber , Rockies area vice president	\$43,317 penalty over workplace fatality	2	\$54,817
			96	\$93,438,562

Source: Analysis of Western Energy Alliance [board](#) members, Violation Tracker [enforcement data](#), 2020-2024

Table 2: Categories of Enforcement Cases Faced by Fossil Fuel Companies on Western Energy Alliance Board

Offense Type	Number of Cases	Total Settlement
Environmental	72	\$84,216,696
Federal leasing royalty	3	\$7,735,275
Workplace/employment	8	\$1,247,841
Pipeline safety	3	\$151,700
Railroad safety	10	\$87,050
Grand Total	96	\$93,438,562

Source: Analysis of Western Energy Alliance [board](#) members, Violation Tracker [enforcement data](#), 2020-2024

Serving Oil and Gas Interests

It is abundantly clear from an examination of Project 2025's [chapter](#) on the Interior Department that the Trump administration is prepared to undermine the Biden administration's work to balance the needs of conservation and environmental protection with fossil fuel exploration. Without citing evidence or supporting data, Project 2025 claimed that the Interior Department under President Joe Biden worked "to advance a radical climate agenda, ostensibly to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, for which DOI has no statutory responsibility or authority."

It also argued that "Biden's DOI is hoarding supplies of energy and keeping them from Americans whose lives could be improved with cheaper and more abundant energy while making the economy stronger and providing job opportunities for Americans. DOI is a bad manager of the public trust and has operated lawlessly in defiance of congressional statute and federal court orders."

The Biden administration did no such thing. Under Biden, the Interior Department took modest steps to ensure that oil and gas companies paid adequate royalties to compensate taxpayers for drilling on public lands and moved to ensure they set aside resources to ensure that drilling firms can cover the cost of cleaning up old wells — an effort that Sgamma's group [sued to block](#). In fact, Sgamma even denied that it was even necessary to require more financial assurances from oil companies to ensure they meet their well-cleanup responsibilities, [calling those changes](#) "an arbitrary and capricious solution to a problem that doesn't exist."

Despite [years of overheated complaints](#) from Sgamma and Republicans on Capitol Hill, the Biden administration did not try to curb domestic drilling in a meaningful way, and U.S oil and gas production hit new records. The reason is simple: High global oil prices during the Biden years made drilling on public lands attractive for oil and gas firms.

Sgamma's official [ethics agreement](#) gives her wide latitude to continue working on the same energy issues upon which her former employer is actively lobbying the government. Sgamma pledged, for one year, to "seek written authorization to participate personally and substantially in certain particular matters involving specific parties in which I know the Western Energy Alliance is a party or represents a party." Doing so, she wrote, would "ensure my ability to participate in underlying decisions, actions, and determinations, including rulemaking and guidance, pending at the Bureau of Land Management which are the subject of

litigation brought by the Western Energy Alliance.” Sgamma’s only concession was that “However, I understand that any authorization will not allow me to participate personally and substantially in any decisions about litigation in which the Western Energy Alliance is a party or represents a party.”

This highly unusual ethics agreement, worked out with the Trump-appointed Office of Government Ethics is extraordinarily broad, and an extreme departure from how federal ethics law [has been interpreted in the past](#).

Under federal law, the Bureau of Land Management’s mission is to [balance multiple uses](#) of federal lands, including grazing, mining, fossil fuel production, renewable energy production, outdoor recreation, and conservation. Sgamma’s longstanding experience as a key oil and gas industry advocate and [supporter of public land privatization](#) indicates that she will favor her former colleagues in the fossil fuel industry, selling off land to the highest bidder rather than conserving America’s public lands for the benefit of future generations.

Minimizing Climate Change

Sgamma, who worked at the Western Energy Alliance for [nearly 20 years](#), has a history of extreme statements, minimizing climate change and ignoring the environmental harms of oil and gas drilling. She has repeatedly downplayed the economic threat posed by global climate catastrophe, [claiming that](#) “The ‘cure’ to climate change being proposed from the Left is worse than the problem.”

When Trump exited the Paris climate accords in 2017, Sgamma’s response to the “good news” from Paris was “I like to remember how much more effective the oil and natural gas industry is at providing a real solution to climate change than any international treaty such as Paris or Kyoto; government policy like a carbon tax or cap-and-business; or renewable subsidy.” In the same blog, she also argued, preposterously, that “Climate alarmists and others looking to fundamentally reorient society don’t like to admit it, but the oil and natural gas industry has done more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions than any government climate change policy,”

As evidence, Sgamma has cited the role of switching from coal to natural gas for electricity generation in reducing the overall carbon footprint of the United States, an argument that ignores the urgent need to further reduce emissions. Indeed, Sgamma’s trade group has opposed efforts to mitigate the damage from methane gas leaks. The trade group opposed the Biden administration’s effort to charge

companies for methane emissions and recently [applauded](#) the Republican-controlled Congress's vote to repeal that rule.

Pushing A Radical Land Privatization Agenda

Sgamma also had sympathy for the anti-government ideology behind the 2016 far-right anti-government occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. In response, Sgamma [wrote a lengthy blog post](#) condemning the occupiers as “serious lawbreakers whose actions I completely condemn,” but also offering general sympathy for the extremists' land-privatization cause. Sgamma argued that “federal abuses leading us to this sorry situation today deserve honest attention and systemic change.” She also claimed that “The situation arises from too much federal ownership of land in the West” and that “Environmental activists, and heavy-handed bureaucrats under their sway, often consider local rural communities as inconvenient rednecks whose needs are subordinate to policies that expand federal control.”

Conclusion

In his first term, Trump stacked the Interior Department with anti-government extremists and climate change minimizers or deniers who did the bidding of dirty energy corporations and sought to [turn over public lands to the private sector](#). The second Trump term will be no different. Under Trump, fossil fuel companies and mining interests will push to exploit public lands for maximum profit, putting the planet further in peril and derailing the transition to a clean energy economy. Trump kicked off his second term with a bogus [declaration of an energy emergency](#) and has moved to impose a so-called “energy dominance” agenda, putting [fossil fuels ahead of renewables](#) while dismantling generations of safety and conservation laws to promote coal, natural gas and oil. Our country and our public lands deserve better.